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Citation for published version:

Kappeler, A 2017, 'From reactionary modernization to endogenous development: The revolution in hydroelectricity in Venezuela', *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 41, no. 3, pp. 241–262.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-017-9454-9>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1007/s10624-017-9454-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-017-9454-9)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Dialectical Anthropology

Publisher Rights Statement:

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From Reactionary Modernization to Endogenous Development: The Revolution in Hydroelectricity in Venezuela

Abstract

For much of the twentieth century, Venezuela was regarded as one of the developing nations destined to take its place among the affluent societies of the world. The spectacular infrastructure projects sponsored by the Venezuelan government and funded with revenue from the petroleum industry were taken as evidence of progress and the impending arrival of modernity. Showcasing the technical prowess of the Venezuelan state, these projects captured the national imagination and won consent for political elites by calling forth aspirations for total societal transformation. In this article, I explore the re-construction of hegemonic consent as part of one such project—a hydroelectric dam in the state of Barinas—and the survival of a vision of progress through the built environment, even after the social-economic crisis of the late twentieth century. Drawing on fieldwork in areas near the formerly incomplete project site, I account for what, at first glance, seem to be drastic shifts in local political allegiances and incongruous support for the conservative military dictatorship of Marcos Perez Jimenez and the Bolivarian Government of Hugo Chavez. Suggesting that a high modernist vision of development is a pivot for hegemonic consent, I argue that the completion of this dam after a long hiatus has won the support of a caste of state workers and that the backing of these workers is crucial to the preservation of organized political power.

Keywords: [dams; infrastructure; development; hegemony; twenty-first century socialism; popular sovereignty; Venezuela]

“...when the results of a democratic government are disastrous for a collective, one must react against this government arisen from democracy”

—Marcos Perez Jimenez, *Habla El General*

“In the hope of bettering themselves all men are ready to change masters...”

—Machiavelli, *The Prince*

This article investigates the role of spectacular infrastructure projects in the construction of hegemonic consent and the ways in which such projects have earned support for a variety of leaderships in Venezuelan history. Focusing on the legacy of a hydroelectric dam in the state of Barinas and how the revival of the project has won the approval of workers in a nearby state enterprise, I show how the current Venezuelan government is able to hail these actors concerned with their status and social mobility on the basis of a long established nexus between the built environment, progress, and popular sovereignty. The anthropological literature on dams has emphasized the violence and coercion

associated with such projects as well as the corruption and inefficiency linked to the generation of hydroelectricity (Mains 2012; Larkin 2013; Folch 2013; Wilson 2014; Gupta 2015). Studies of dams have focused on their negative impact on the environment and indigenous peoples as well as the ways in which these projects continue to have marginalizing effects long after they are completed (e.g. Mitchell 2002; Chernela 2010; Rodgers and O'Neill 2012; Athayde 2014; Scudder 2006). Studies have also focused on the strategies and tactics of social movements contesting the repressive features of what Erik Swyngedouw (1999; 2005) has called “hydraulic statecraft” (e.g. Ghosh 2006; Li 2007; Baviskar 2001; McAllister 2013; Anand 2012; Folch 2016; 2015). Yet as often as dams have been sites of coercion, I would also argue they have been used to obtain consent (cf. Coleman 2014).

In this article, I explore the ways in which hydroelectric infrastructure in Venezuela is constructed—both literally and figuratively—and the relationship between the material manifestations of a particular vision of development and the problem of obtaining consent for rule. In what follows, I argue that hydroelectric dams are potent symbols of national development and progress in Venezuela, but that they also serve to mask contradictions inherent in the process of modernization. As a number of scholars have argued, development is a conflict-ridden practice which must be viewed in terms of a radical disjuncture between the idealized outcomes presented in development programs and the messy processes of intervention required to transform a society and its subjects (Li 2007; Cowen and Shenton 1999; Hart 2005; Kaika 2005; Ferguson 1991). Acting upon, and to a certain extent requiring, inequality, as justification for its modes of intervention, I argue that modernization is both a means of *exercising* and *preserving* organized power and that development is the idiom in which these relations of power are discussed and debated.

Following Gramsci (1971), I view development as “a hegemonic language” or a means for societal elites to obtain consent. But following Roseberry (1994), I also view development as “a language of contention” or a shared ideological framework from which a variety of actors can press claims. As a hegemonic concept in Venezuela, development is shared among a wide array of social groups. Nearly every political party makes claims with regard to development, and in this sense, the concept is universal. There are debates about what development is and how best to achieve development. But the concept itself cannot be questioned. Indeed, I argue it is the struggle to imbue the concept with a specific content, which can be regarded as a defining feature of political struggles in Venezuela in the twentieth century and of such struggles today.

Throughout the twentieth century, Venezuelan leaders enacted a series of nation-building projects designed to elevate the nation to the status of ‘the first world.’ These projects, translating revenue from the petroleum sector into modern infrastructure and industry, would ostensibly transform the society and lead to a generalized social welfare. These projects, in turn, became a means of integrating broad sectors of Venezuelan society into ‘historic blocs’ or multi-class alliances, which account for the remarkable stability of Venezuelan democracy and the political system more generally. Yet, I argue, it is out of the failure or suspension of many of these projects and a faltering of this narrative of

progress at the end of the twentieth century that we can grasp the recent push for infrastructural modernization in Venezuela and the return of a discourse which counterposes the sovereignty of *el pueblo*, ‘the people,’ to the formalism of liberal democracy.

In the Shadow of a Dam

In June 2007, I started fieldwork in a state-run agriculture project in the western plains of Venezuela as part of an effort to understand the impact of agrarian reform on rural livelihoods. The project was a large-scale, agro-industrial farm owned by the Venezuelan Agrarian Corporation, a state holding company, and one of several projects like it across the state of Barinas designed to increase food production and rural employment. The project was a technically sophisticated, high modern operation, which brought together a variety of actors to achieve its goals. Staffed by a team of technical experts responsible for cultivation and the supervision of laborers who dealt with the day-to-day running of the farm, leaders emphasized the efficiency of this Fordist ‘factory in the field’ and the tension-free relations between employees and managers. From the start of my research, I was interested in the labor relations of the project and how leaders reconciled the populist rhetoric of the Bolivarian Government with the overtly hierarchical nature of the enterprise and an organizational structure that accorded differential status to employees. Over the course of several months of work on the farm, it became clear to me that status was a source of tension, but that this tension was not negotiated solely within the site; it was also negotiated by another project in the nearby area.

The farm where I worked was several thousand hectares in size. Yet in spite of the massive scale of the project, the farm was dwarfed by an even larger hydroelectric dam a few miles to the northeast. Started by the Venezuelan military in the 1950s, the complex was designed to control flooding on the Masparro and Boconó Rivers while generating electricity and irrigating the lands of the region during the dry months of *la sequia*. The dam flooded an area the size of a small town and created an artificial lake many miles wide and across. The complex thus reigned over the landscape, and in many ways, my fieldsite was in the shadow of the dam. As one might expect, the dam was a key point of reference and residents often used the dam to describe the distance to a given location, conveying a sense of place in relation to ‘*la represa*.’ Yet more than a simple geographical marker, the dam was also a figure lurking in the background of everyday life, and as I got to know residents, I learned that there was a nostalgic longing for the project and the era of its construction. This set of facts made the site an omnipresent figure in my fieldwork. The dam was begun at a time where there was little appreciable infrastructure in the area and residents had received scant attention from the central government. Descriptions of the period before the start of the dam were stark, with residents underscoring their relative isolation and material deprivation. Residents described themselves as having “lived alone” or apart from the rest of society and as unable to access resources that were increasingly available in other parts of the country. As one of the workers on the farm described the period, echoing the words of his grandfather, it was a time when,

“You had to learn to eat *arepa* [fried corn bread] with a little bit of tuna and nothing else. It was very hard. There was no work—no money. He [i.e. the grandfather] lived in a shack [*ranchito*] near where the lake is now. He started working on the dam and things got a little better.”

Deploying tropes of ‘the arrival of the state’ and ‘civilizing wilderness’ to describe the inception of the project (see Scott 1998), residents often referred to the area prior to the construction of dam as having been *puro monte y culebra* or “nothing but weeds and snakes.”¹ In their words, the Venezuelan government had arrived to clear away the weeds and snakes to make way for progress. But the project was also used to clear away the opponents of the military.

As Christine Folch (2013) has argued, hydroelectric dams were in many ways the signature projects of the twentieth century dictatorships in Latin America, and more than simple development projects, these sites were also tools of state surveillance and terror. These observations were certainly borne out by the history of my fieldsite and its use as a base of operations for the counter-insurgency campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s. Both the farm and the dam complex were used to launch attacks on leftist guerillas in the area and political activists were tortured and murdered on the grounds. The sites thus had terrible resonances for some locals and a few residents told me they believed the souls of the dead still haunted the area. Yet the history of violence associated with the sites was not confined to the era of the military dictatorship and this violence did not prevent locals from admiring them as technical achievements, or using them to evaluate political leaderships, as my analysis will show.

Reactionary Modernization and its Discontents

In the mid-twentieth century, Venezuela was ruled by a military dictatorship, which was responsible for some of the worst abuses in the history of the nation—and some of its greatest technical achievements. Having taken power in a coup against the government of Romulo Gallegos in 1948, the years of military rule were characterized by generalized repression and suspension of press freedom and the right to assembly. Yet in spite of having overthrown a democratically elected government, the regime occupies a profoundly ambivalent place in popular memory (Cartay 1998). Widely regarded as having set Venezuela on its path to modernity and progress, the nation-building projects of the dictatorship are revered, even as critics and a few supporters acknowledge that the regime interrupted a process of liberalization that began with the death of the dictator

¹ The dialectic of civilization and barbarism has long played a critical role in the cultural construction of the *llanos* and rural areas more generally. This motif figures centrally in Venezuelan literature, including the novels of Romulo Gallegos such as *Doña Barbara* (1975) and *Pobre Negro* (1971). This dialectic which emphasize the violence and inscrutability of wilderness is mystifying, however, as it tends to disguise the violence inherent in civilization/modernity by juxtaposing it with an essentially Hobbesian conception of nature.

Juan Vicente Gomez in 1935 (Coronil 1997). Indeed, this tension between the desire for progress and the preservation of order was reflected in the ideology of the regime itself.²

Labeled ‘fascist by many on the Venezuelan left (and not without good reason) the military embodied the contradictory ideals of the high modern, reactionary regimes of the twentieth century.’³ Steeped in the ideology of positivism and racial eugenics, the regime embraced the idea that Venezuela could be sped up along its path to development by altering the racial composition of the nation and its physical environment. Believing the introduction of European settlers would bring much needed capital and a superior culture to Venezuela, the military supported an increase in foreign immigration (Berglund 1994; Wright 1990). Yet the regime also pledged to preserve the essential authenticity of ‘Venezuelan-ness’ and to halt the spread of ‘dangerous foreign ideas’ (Rincon 1982; Rodriguez 1984).⁴ The military thus had a Janus face. At once presenting itself as the bearer of progress and modernity, the regime also presented itself as the defender of the traditional order. Espousing a unique brand of anti-Yankee, anti-communist nationalism, the regime combined critiques of US “economic colonialism” in Latin America with dependency on foreign energy corporations and hostility to popular action from below (see Blanco Muñoz 1983).⁵

Encapsulating this dual role, *El Nuevo Ideal Nacional* or “New National Ideal” of its leader, Marcos Perez Jimenez sought to merge technical practices of modernization with reactionary social policies designed to halt the advance of racial, gender, and class struggles. Embracing the unilinear, stagist model of growth inherent in modernization theory (see Rostow 1952; 1962; cf. Frank 1967; Prebisch 1970; Dos Santos 1970), the dictatorship advanced a vision of progress in which Venezuela could achieve its nation-building goals without restructuring property relations.⁶ Public works projects played a central role in this vision as the basis for the type of growth that would allow Venezuela to ‘catch up’ with ‘the first world’ without destabilizing existing hierarchies. As the

² The Venezuelan historian Avendaño Lugo (1982) writes that “...the primacy of the military in the political life of the country under the dictatorship of Perez Jimenez fused with the ideological, economic, and strategic military interests of the United States”(8) and that “privileged minorities” calling for “social peace” backed the coup (336)(my translation).

³ For analysis of fascism and conservative military dictatorships in Europe and Latin America, see Narotzky and Smith 2006; Oren 2000.

⁴ Insularity and obscurantism also characterized the government of General Eleazar López Contreras (1935-1941)(Carrera Damas 2011: 139-140).

⁵ Jose Ramon Avendaño Lugo (1982) has argued that the New National Ideal served as “a defense mechanism” that “disguised the hegemonic aspirations of personalist-militarism” (8) and that it helped to “confront and contain class contradictions by disguising relations of domination with an appeal to the national interest [*el bien nacional*]”(22)(my translation). In contrast to this view, I would argue that the New National Ideal was not a *disguise* for hegemonic aspirations, but rather an *articulation* of the aspiration itself. Key aspects of the doctrine including its positivist emphasis on the physical habitat predated the dictatorship and to suggest that there is any way to materially define the ‘national interest’ or a way to construct a politics outside the national-popular framework is an argument closer to ‘false consciousness’ than Gramscian hegemony.

⁶ The genealogy of the New National Ideal is a subject of considerable debate. Perez Jimenez dismissed any linkage between the New National Ideal and the ‘Democratic Caesarism’ of Venezuelan positivist Laureano Vallenilla Lanz (Blanco Muñoz 1983: 257; 389), but the parallels between the two ideologies seem difficult to deny.

Venezuelan anthropologist Fernando Coronil (1997) has argued, “[t]his concern to ‘build’ the nation by constructing its material structure was expressed in terms of a modernizing discourse that combined positivist emphasis on the formative power of physical habitat with a conception of development as moving through stages” (167). This model envisioned a radical transformation of society by way of investing income from natural resources into infrastructures that could unlock the energy trapped in the interior of the nation and the bodies of its citizens. Hydroelectric dams were a way of linking the social and physical bodies of the nation and building support for the regime (*ibid.*). With some of the greatest hydroelectric potential of any nation in the world, Venezuela had enough miles of river to generate power for its own needs and much of the rest of the continent. The regime thus viewed the construction of hydroelectric dams as prerequisite for the type of industrialization that would allow the nation to free itself from dependency on oil exports.

In this first stage of growth, Venezuela would create the networks required to supply nascent heavy industry with power and acquire the technical know-how required to run enterprises that could work up raw materials and absorb the surplus labor created by the streamlining of agriculture. This transfer of energy would allow Venezuela to ‘take off’ and arrive at a state of development where the nation was no longer dependent on revenue from natural resources and its alternative economic sectors could sustain the society. The model of development was autarchic in two senses: first, it envisioned a role for the military in which the ruling junta’s authority superseded electoral mandates and second, massive public works projects or *obras* were conceived as laying the foundation for the type of self-sustaining economy that could feed off its own demand—a strategy funded, at least in theory, with the nation’s natural resources (see Blanco Muñoz 1983). *El Plan Hidroeléctrico*—as it was known—was part of this series of *obras* that would instill the population with ‘the spirit of work’ and serve as evidence of the new ideal’s actualization (*ibid.*).

Embodying the technical-organizational capacity of the military, these projects substantiated the dictatorship’s claim to be the only agency capable of “sowing the oil” into a modern, diversified economy. The tensions issuing from the illiberal character of the regime, meanwhile, were muted by the fact that the military could claim its projects benefitted society at large and that its development agenda was universal.⁷ Eschewing formal democracy in favor of a “democracy of action,” the military argued the sovereignty entrusted to it would be used to improve the quality of life of the average citizen and that once Venezuelan society had attained a certain ‘level of culture’ that it would allow the return of political competition (Coronil 1997: 164).⁸ In reality, however,

⁷ The popularity of the regime was so widespread that the Venezuelan historian Rafael Cartay (1998) has gone so far as to say that with exception of a few *Adecos* and communists, “...*todos fuimos de alguna manera Perezjimenistas*, “We were all in some way supporters of Perez Jimenez” (8).

⁸ Even where this potential has been tapped, underutilization persists. The Guri dam in the state of Bolivar, for example, is still one of the four largest dams in the world, but it only generates a fraction of its potential capacity (Parraga 2010).⁸

these projects tended to benefit select groups in society, and the junta soon abandoned any talk of restoring elections.⁹

To ensure the success of its program (and the longevity of its rule), the military threw its weight behind a caste of technical experts and bureaucrats often drawn from its own ranks to supervise the projects. Receiving ample salaries and benefits, this caste of state workers came to regard itself as a ‘custodian’ of the public good and as having interests synonymous with the nation as a whole (see Avendaño Lugo 1982: 16-17; Blanco Muñoz 1983).¹⁰ But the reliance of the modernization program on petroleum rent meant the growing power of labor in the energy sector posed a threat to the stability of the bloc and tensions engendered by this model of growth eventually threatened the regime. Unable to contain the contradictions unleashed by rapid urbanization and haphazard growth of the built environment, the regime faced a massive influx of rural migrants and labor unrest spurred by curtailment of wage gains. The labor surpluses created by the streamlining of agriculture, meanwhile, were not entirely absorbed in heavy industry and public works projects, as planners envisioned, and discontent in the peri-urban areas eventually permitted the opposition political parties to forge a counter-consensus when the junta refused to recognize the results of a plebiscite in which it was defeated.

A Great Venezuela

On January 23rd 1958, the regime was overthrown in a popular uprising and its leaders went into exile. Yet key aspects of its modernization program were retained by its liberal successors. Forging the type of consensus Gramsci (1971) referred to as ‘the national-popular’ (see Gurcan 2013), leaders of the populist party *Acción Democrática* (AD) were able to bind multiple classes and class fractions together under a single leadership by way of expansive social welfare policies and industrialization efforts linked to infrastructure (for a discussion of expansive hegemony, see Smith 2011). Articulating a vision of progress in which liberal institutions were prerequisites for inclusive growth, AD offered the formula of “democracy plus industry” as the basis for national development (Betancourt 1967). Whereas the military modernization program had been largely articulated in terms of a “democracy of action” which eschewed multiparty elections, AD regarded electoral competition as evidence of its claim to popular sovereignty and legitimacy. Describing its policy as “a democratic form of development” that could fulfill the promise of citizenship and equal membership in the nation, improvements in the delivery of services were synonymous with an expansion of rights and a bettering of the life chances for the average Venezuelan (Davila 1992). Improvements in hydroelectric infrastructure and access to electricity were also regarded as essential to national sovereignty and independence.¹¹

⁹ First developed by the journalist Arturo Uslar Pietri in the 1930s, this slogan became a byword for development in Venezuela.

¹⁰ For discussion of the role of ‘the trustee’ in development interventions, see Li 2007.

¹¹ Public infrastructure projects are often massive giveaways to private capital. These infrastructures facilitate the flow of labor and commodities at the public expense while delivering most of the benefits to elites. Marx (1867) famously observed that the public debt used to finance such projects and create joint stock companies was a way of extracting surplus from the working classes without inducing direct

Skeptical of the presence of the military in the political system and other state institutions, AD was also skeptical of the penetration of foreign capital during the years of the dictatorship. The nationalization of the petroleum sector in 1976 thus represented a partial rolling back of the policy of offering rent-bearing concessions to foreign energy corporations and a re-envisioning of the strategy for resource development (see Perez Alfonzo 1961; Petras et al 1977). In the 1970s, record high oil prices and greater control over the commodity chain, left Venezuela awash in petrodollars and the country seemed able to afford both capital-intensive industrialization and social benefits programs. Having established a framework, which could ensure stability and the continuity of development efforts without the need to assume dictatorial powers, the pact of *Punto Fijo* signed by the major political parties created a system in which popular consent was affirmed in elections and active collaboration among elites ensured nation-building efforts were pursued on the basis of a broad consensus.¹² Founded on this national-popular consensus and an unprecedented increase in the national wealth (Karl 1997), Carlos Andres Perez, one of AD's most flamboyant leaders, pledged to build 'a great Venezuela' and embarked on a program of import substitution industrialization. Once again, hydroelectric dams played a vital role.

Premised on the idea that the spread of technology from the global north would allow Venezuela to fabricate its own inputs locally, dams were construed as part of a 'democratic infrastructure' (Schwenkel 2014) that could provide power to industries and jobs for less privileged strata as well as profits for capital.¹³ Benefitting the nation as a whole, rather than specific classes or interest groups, the harnessing of alternative sources of energy would allow Venezuela to maximize the amount of petroleum it sent abroad and to build up the stocks of capital required to support an endogenous manufacturing sector (for discussion of this strategy, see Prat 2014; DiJohn 2009; Randall 1987). Such projects were conceived as reconciling tensions between labor and capital and taking the energy out of leftist insurgency.¹⁴

Yet in spite of the economic successes in the period, a rising indebtedness and precipitous declines in oil prices in the 1980s brought an end to visions of a Great Venezuela. A response to neoliberal austerity measures imposed in the wake of massive budgetary shortfalls, the 1989 *Caracazo* riots led to an organic crisis in Venezuela and a discrediting of the major political parties. The imposition of structural adjustment policies and reductions in standards of living along with the failure of capital-intensive projects spurred a collective re-evaluation of the developmental models of the 1970s and their promises of total societal transformation. Significant strides were certainly made in the era. Yet many of the efforts to bring electricity to the Venezuelan people were stillborn.ⁱ

struggles against capital (919-922)(for analysis of the use of energy and debt crisis to renegotiate labor-capital relations, see Franquesa 2014).

¹² For discussion of this monopolistic political pact, see Coronil 1997.

¹³ The Guri dam started by the military dictatorship was to be expanded in the 1970s to provide power for rural industrialization efforts, e.g. tractor factories (see Coronil 1997). Not too far from the Masparro dam in Barinas, the Bolivarian Government has built a tractor factory in Santa Ines with the aid of Belarus.

¹⁴ Contrary to official histories, a considerable amount of violence was required to preserve this 'democratic' consensus (see Ciccariello-Maher 2013 for history of guerilla movements in Venezuela).

At the end of the twentieth century, the interior of the nation was littered with half-completed hydroelectric dams, attesting to the contentious legacy of the military dictatorship and the liberal governments which succeeded it—governments which many Venezuelans regarded as incapable of replicating its technical achievements. Yet when I returned in Venezuela in 2009, the dam near my fieldsite had taken on a new valence.

Endogenous Development and its Partners

In 2007, I heard a variety of stories about the Masparro dam and the era of its construction. As local residents told me, the arrival of state planners was greeted with considerable fanfare in the area and many were hopeful about the benefits the project might bring. The dam was a showpiece of the military modernization program in the state and the project aspired to shine “the light of modernity” on areas construed as “benighted rural communities.” Along with bridge and road construction in the area, the project promised to integrate the sparsely populated territory with the urban areas of the nation. The project was thus a form of dialog between elites and subalterns in which residents were offered the chance to barter loyalty to the regime for material progress. Promoting the visibility of linkages with the centers of power (Larkin 2008; Folch 2013; cf. Akhter 2015), the dam was a visible mark of state intervention on the landscape, whose lines reached far into the urban areas. Not surprisingly, there was considerable pageantry associated with the establishment of these linkages.

As a local hotel owner recounted to me, the ceremony inaugurating the project was a major event in the area. Attended by Perez Jimenez and the Argentinian President Juan Peron, the festivities included a parade in which the two leaders marched on foot and the hotel owner’s brother, who he described as “tall for his age” was spotted by Peron and touched on the top of the head in a gesture of paternal sanction. These brushes with elite power in rural areas were part of cultivating the mystique of the state (Taussig 1997; Coleman 2014) and its ability to enlist subalterns in the process of transforming society. Such performances were a means of building up support for and erasing the violence associated with such projects (as well as the inequities ignored by them). The linkage to the energy grid raised hopes for better days. Yet with the fall of the military, the project came to an abrupt halt and the site sat incomplete for decades. There were many such half-completed sites in Venezuela, which bore witness to the mercurial nature of the petrostate and attested to the failure of leaders to complete the process started by the dictatorship, opening up space for a re-articulation of the era’s significance.

As Akhil Gupta (2015) has argued, the sudden suspension of infrastructure projects is a regular feature of the lifecycle of nation building in the global south and these periods of inactivity can tell us as much about the meaning and temporality of development as the successful completion of such projects (see also Geenen 2017). In Venezuela, the decay of suspended infrastructure served as a constant reminder of the failure of elites to deliver on promises of societal transformation and a history that has witnessed the continual interruption of nation-building efforts. In this context, *una falta de continuidad* or ‘a lack of continuity’ became a byword for this intermittent process of development that never

resulted in the imagined social transformation and that failed to protect the nation from the vagaries of the global market.

By the early 2000s, the Masparro dam had become a fact of life in the local area. Residents of the state capital enjoyed boating on the lake on weekends and the area was also a popular local fishing spot. National and international delegations that visited the farm where I worked were often taken to the area and given a tour of the complex, with delegates taking pictures of the half-finished wonder. Delegates often commented on the incompleteness of the project and what a pity it was that it had not lived up to its potential. All the work of moving the earth and building the dam itself had been completed. But the site had never generated electricity. The project was heartbreakingly close to completion, lacking only the turbines. The site thus had a feel of a project that had fallen short of its intended purpose and locals talked of the site with a wistful desire for renewed investment. As scholars have argued (Howe et al 2015), residents living in “the background” of infrastructures constructed to channel resources other, distant populations are often ignored or silenced by organized power (see also Boyer 2014). Yet when the retrofitting or restructuring of such infrastructures is required, these groups can suddenly be thrown into focus and become subjects of contention (Harvey 2014). In the wake of declining oil prices in the 1980s and the crisis of the 1990s, nation-building efforts in Venezuela largely came to a halt and residents living in the shadows of these projects were left to languish in relative poverty and obscurity. Yet when a new government came to power in 1998, those living in the vicinity of the Masparro Dam became a potential base of power and a means for reconstructing hegemonic consensus.

In 1999, the newly elected Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez convened a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the constitution and reform state institutions (for an overview, see Wilpert 2007; Ciccariello-Maher 2013). The delegates adopted a series of reform proposals supporting a vision referred to as “endogenous development.” Embodying a retreat from the neoliberal policies of the 1980s and 1990s, the program retained the redistributive features of earlier models, including conditional cash transfers and consumer subsidies. Yet this government was not only concerned with improving social welfare via increased distribution of wealth from the state petroleum company, but also with diversifying the economy and reducing dependency on oil.¹⁵ Not unlike the import substitution policies of the 1960s and 1970s, endogenous development sought to create internal markets for agricultural and industrial products by increasing the purchasing power of the population and modernizing the economy. The program also retained an emphasis on heavy industry and infrastructure that could supply state enterprises with electricity. Ironically, for a society founded on the export of energy, generating power for its own needs was a still major concern at the start of the twenty-first century and the lack

¹⁵ Recent scholarship has emphasized ‘the neo-extractivist’ character of the left governments in Latin America and their reliance on the revenue of natural resources to carry out development policy (e.g. Petras and Veltmeyer 2014). While this is an accurate description of the source of income, and the definitions of endogenous development offered by Bolivarian Government often underscore the redistributive aspects of its policies, this emphasis can ignore the extent to which Venezuela has invested considerable capital in state-led industrialization projects and an expansion of the productive apparatus. In my experience, basic income grants and bursaries are popular with lower strata and the mass of urbanites, but they are not as popular with middle class individuals (like Jorge) concerned with long-term prospects for development.

of an adequate power grid was one of the bases for the overlap in the developmental visions of the two military leaders.¹⁶

Utilizing a populist rhetoric in which the desires of *el pueblo* superseded the formalism of the two-party system in Venezuela, Chávez elided criticisms of the anti-liberal character of his leadership and that of Pérez Jiménez by emphasizing the role of the military as an instrument of national development and an engine of economic growth. In an April 2010 episode of his weekly television program *Aló Presidente*, Chavez stated that, "...general Pérez Jiménez was the best president Venezuela had in a long time. He was better than Romulo Betancourt [first president of the Fourth Republic]; he was better than all of them [i.e. leaders of AD]... They hated him because he was military" (my translation, 25, 355). In this reading of Venezuelan history, the 'democratic transition' with the fall of the regime in 1958 was a brief interlude in which the parties of "the Fourth Republic" had failed to take up the project of nation-building. In spite of their liberal credentials, these leaders had been "more dictatorial" in their style of governance than their military predecessors and more irreverent of the popular will. In this reading, "the Fifth Republic" ushered in by the Bolivarian Revolution had brought an end to this interregnum and Chavez's leadership was now reviving the types of projects, which foreshadowed the uplift of the nation. His government was restarting the forward march of progress suspended in the last decades of the 20th century and its ideology had strong resonances with the "democracy of action" of the dictatorship and the notion that a unitary state could ensure sovereignty—an idea linked to Simon Bolívar and the traditions of the 19th century. Indeed one of the most spectacular sites built during the dictatorship—the Guri dam—was redubbed *El Centro Hidroeléctrico Simon Bolívar* to signify a return to the nation's 'original principles'. But endogenous development also required the retrofitting and *material* reconstruction of such sites.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the Venezuelan population increased dramatically, and with it, the demand for electricity. One of the greatest areas of growth was the state of Barinas, the home state of Hugo Chavez. An erstwhile 'backwater,' the capital was now a sizable urban center with a population of more than three hundred and fifty thousand. As part of the goal of meeting growing demand for electricity in the state, the public electric company *Corpoelec* restarted work on the Masparro dam, with the goal of having an installed capacity of 25 megawatts generated by two new turbines. The effort to complete the dam was touted as one of the signature projects of the socialist government, and these efforts were just the start.¹⁷ The project was one of thirty-four such initiatives in the state that would "raise the quality of service" and improve the

¹⁶ This affinity was so explicit that Chavez sought to invite the former dictator to his inauguration, but was told by advisors that it would alienate the left parties in his electoral coalition and the invitation was quietly withdrawn (see Elizalde and Báez 2005).

¹⁷ The policies of the Bolivarian Government with regard to electricity and hydroelectric dams have moved in essentially the opposite direction of broader regional trends, which reflect a move toward greater foreign investment (often by Spanish foreign capital) and privatization of the infrastructure (see Rozas Balbotín 2009).

generation and transmission of electricity, while bringing other tangible benefits.¹⁸ Yet what proved to be far more intriguing to me than any of the technical aspects of the project was the effect it had on one of my key informants.

Socialism and Status

In my first few weeks of research, I met Jorge, a truck driver in the state enterprise near the dam. A dedicated *Chavista*, Jorge was one of the most ideologically conscious workers in the farm. His observations about Venezuelan politics and society were frequently acute and he was well spoken in Spanish, and he even knew a certain amount of English. Although he could not speak the latter particularly well, he could at least understand me when I spoke and I was impressed with his skills. This ability showed the mark of formal education, which differentiated him from the rest of the truck drivers, most of whom were drawn from poor rural families. Although there were no unions in the farm, Jorge exercised an informal leadership position and he could be seen standing in front of other workers discussing an issue—if not quite lecturing them, at least requiring their respectful attention. For these reasons, I suspect, he was selected by managers to show me the various sites in the farm, and to report anything suspicious on my part. Yet any mistrust between us quickly evaporated and we became friends. I noticed Jorge did not hold a position according with his status, which raised a question: why was he in this position?

When I asked about his background, Jorge satisfied my curiosity, by saying “I am the only one in my family who is not a professional.” His brothers were all doctors and lawyers, and his youngest brother was nearing completion of his studies to be a paramedic. But Jorge had failed to complete his degree. This proved to be a source of great frustration for him and Jorge often voiced disapproval with the classist attitudes of coworkers above him in the enterprise. Jorge described his first encounter with this prejudice when he applied for his job. “When I came to apply I drove up in my own car. There I was: well dressed in a white shirt with a tie and one of the women [i.e. secretary in the headquarters] thought I was an engineer. We talked for a bit while I waited [for the interview], but when she found out I was applying to be a truck driver she never spoke to me again [i.e. after he received the job]. This classism hurts the soul.” Jorge was concerned with this lack of respect from those he felt to be his equals and he seemed to be preoccupied with his lack of social mobility. Indeed when he talked about ‘the revolution’ and his support for the ruling party, he framed it in terms of upward mobility. “The good thing about this socialism—such as it is—is the chance to advance.” Socialism represented a claim to self-improvement, and he judged the project on the basis his own status as an individual who was born into, but had not yet achieved ‘middle class’ respectability.

Why Jorge had failed to achieve this status was never entirely clear to me. I was reluctant to probe the matter too deeply for fear of worsening his feelings of inadequacy, and it was clearly a sore spot for him. Jorge moved with his family from the capital when he

¹⁸ These infrastructures were in varying states of repair and operation. The ‘Juan A. Dominguez Rodriguez’ dam, for example, had operated for 22 years, but was highly inefficient and needed improvements to its lines and more turbines to realize its full capacity (see AVN 2015).

was a teenager (which must have entailed a degree of social dislocation) and he had also fathered a child at a young age, which entailed ongoing financial obligations. Yet while these might have been factors, I suspect his failure to achieve status had as much to do with his age and the historical moment of his maturation as anything having to do with his personal life. His older brothers had all become professionals and his younger brother was studying to be a medical technician. Jorge was caught as the only one in his family who had not become an expert or professional. The disruption with the social-economic crisis of the 1990s likely restricted his potential options and it is my suspicion that all these factors together led Jorge to drop out of university and seek employment, preventing him from finishing his degree. Whatever the reasons for his status, however, Jorge's case was not atypical in many respects and it reflected the class anxieties of a stratum that was searching for ways to reestablish its position.¹⁹

After several months of dialog, I felt I grasped Jorge's politics and worldview. I had interpreted Jorge and his convictions on a fairly simple left/right continuum in which Jorge sat firmly on the left. But I was surprised one night when Jorge defied my expectations and showed himself to be a far more complex figure. One evening Jorge, his wife Carolina, and I were discussing the history of Venezuela and what life had been like for their parents when Jorge caught me off guard by referring to his father's support for the military dictatorship. "For my father, Pérez Jiménez was the best [*era lo maximo*]." This comment made in a firmly "socialist" household surprised me, and when I asked Jorge why his father supported the dictatorship, he framed his father's opinion in terms of developmental achievements. "There was so much progress in those days."ⁱⁱ When I asked him if he agreed with his father's appraisal he nodded in the affirmative. To reinforce the point, his wife Carolina added, "The highways, bridges, and viaducts of Caracas were built by Perez Jimenez. We are still using the highways built in the 1950s." There had been tangible signs of development in the era and there was recognition of the enduring quality of the regime's achievements as well as their failure to be replicated. When I asked Jorge about his father's opinion of the present government he replied, "Oh, he likes Chávez. He is with the revolution." Yet I was given the distinct impression that the support had not been readily forthcoming. Unlike other workers in the enterprise, Jorge did not come from a family with deep roots in the left and his father had taken some time to arrive at this conclusion. Nevertheless, his father had been convinced that, if not quite 'the second coming of Pérez Jiménez,' President Chavez had at least got the country moving again. His son shared this view and my belief that support for the two Presidents was likely grounded in their developmental achievements was reinforced by news reports a few weeks later.

In early May 2009, local newspapers began reporting that the hydroelectric dam project was approaching completion. The governor of the state and brother of the President, Adan Chávez, was quoted as saying that the project was an advance in "the construction of the truly free homeland Simon Bolivar dreamed of" and that the project was "a

¹⁹ Jorge recognized widespread corruption and deviation from the lofty ideals in official rhetoric, but in the 'good czar, bad boyar' paradigm, which is a feature of charismatic politics the world over, he faulted Chavez's inner circle for these failures. He told me, "If Chavez truly loves the revolution, he will have to sacrifice one of them."

demonstration of the government's commitment to help communities solve their problems and meet social need in the spirit of popular sovereignty [*la soberanía del pueblo*]” (De Frente 2009). The completion of the project was a topic of conversation among the workers in the farm for several days thereafter. Often dissatisfied with their wages and treatment at the hands of managers, the workers were nevertheless impressed and heartened by the news. Some remarked that they had lived their entire lives without expecting to see the project finished, and this was a milestone event. The workers marveled at the ability of the government to complete the project and it had the effect of at least temporarily tamping down criticisms of the ruling party, and reassuring them that things might be improving. Jorge was especially impressed with the results and pointed to the completion of the dam as evidence of the effectiveness of the leadership, with the time lapsed between the start of the project and its conclusion making the event all the more remarkable. Flagging over the past several weeks due to friction with enterprise managers over his work schedule and frustration with his failure to receive a promotion, a somewhat despondent Jorge was suddenly buoyed by the news. Although days before he had been on the verge denying support to the socialist party in the upcoming elections, stating in a fit of anger that “what we need is a revolution in the revolution,” Jorge was now ecstatic. “The dam was sitting there for decades and now it is making electricity!” he proclaimed, as his fatigue with the leadership seemed to evaporate and give way to renewed support for the ruling party and a pledge of voting *Chavista* in the next elections.

An Uncanny Convergence

Near the end of the twentieth century, many Venezuelans discerned an uncanny resemblance between their newly elected President, Hugo Chavez, and the man who had ruled the country fifty years earlier. The invitation of the former dictator to the inauguration ceremony of the new President only served to cement the association of the two figures in the minds of many observers. Indeed, the parallels between the two men were certainly striking. Both were members of the Venezuelan military and both led coups against AD in times of crisis. Both were characterized as *caudillos*ⁱⁱⁱ and both seemed to have interrupted ‘the forward march of democracy’ and to the extent that liberal democracy and development were linked, of economic progress. Yet this reading of Venezuelan history in which the prospects for development are equal to the strength of liberal democracy and military figures embody an intrinsic threat to popular gains belies the extent to which Venezuelan democracy has always been “military democracy”—a system in which military officers serve as political leaders and the armed forces intervene in the political sphere to secure “the interest of the nation” (Vasquez 2014; Avendaño Lugo 1982)—and the extent to which liberal development efforts were laid on foundations built by the dictatorship.

Unease with the nation-building record of the dictatorship and the current unrest in Venezuela thus reflect at least a partial recognition of the faltering of the narrative of progress that links democracy and development and a surging forth of alternatives. In this sense, it is not unreasonable to say that Venezuela has been stalked by the specter of militarism and more recently, fears of a return of authoritarian populism (Arenas and Calcaño 2006; Rachadell 2015). Yet it would be unfair to overplay the parallels between

the two leaders solely on the basis of the cultural image of the *caudillo* or military leader—however much the era of the dictatorship and ‘the Cult of Bolívar’ remain touchstones for subaltern aspirations (see Davila 1992; Carrera Damas 2011).

As the Venezuelan anthropologist Paula Vasquez (2011) has argued, the *Chavista* movement evinces key divergences from the regime of Pérez Jiménez. Characterizing *Chavismo* as “a compassionate militarism,” which seeks to lessen the gulf between “rich and poor,” while preserving the traditional role of the military as a stabilizing force, she argues that *Chavismo*—rather than a pre-modern specter—is a reworking of the grist of Venezuelan modernity and that the thread of continuity which links the movement with its predecessors is a vision of the military as an engine of economic growth (cf. Carrera Damas 2011).²⁰ In this same spirit, I would argue that the hegemonic character of high modernist development and spectacular infrastructure means that such projects serve as useful tools to counter challenges to the authority of the military and ruling party.

As James Scott (1998) has argued, high modernist leaderships that prove incapable of transforming society in accordance with their idealistic visions often content themselves with ‘utopias-in-miniature’ or smaller versions of the society they hope to create. In Venezuela, hydroelectric dams seemed to play such a role allowing for the type of interpellative interactions that revived the connection between the built environment, organized power, and popular sovereignty. In his writings on the philosophy of Machiavelli, Gramsci (1971) argued that under certain historical conditions, political leaders could come to embody the desires of the nation. Inducing concrete fantasies or “Sorelian myths” that serve to organize the collective will, national leaders became wish-images invested with the power to overcome manifest contradictions in the practice of politics. Unifying disparate wills into a force capable of altering the trajectory of the nation, the leader became a quasi-independent political force, rather than a manifestation of specific class interests. Likewise, one could argue that certain fetish objects play a similar role, linking subaltern aspirations with elite forms of rule. Closely linked with the charisma of the state, spectacular infrastructure projects are both *concrete* and *fantasy*, sustaining hopes for national renewal and epochal transitions (Larkin 2014). A critically neglected aspect of the study of Latin American populism, I argue is not just rhetoric, discursive articulation, or redistribution of resources that can account for the appeal of populist leaderships (cf. Laclau 2005; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; López Maya and Panzarelli 2013), but also their ability to construct ‘signifying materialities; (Gupta 2015) that link the image of the leader with the will of the *populus*.

Completed infrastructure projects in Venezuela gave the leadership a way to ‘hail’ key sectors of society and gain support based on the idea that they were the subjects of nation

²⁰ At the same time, it should be noted, however, that *Chavismo* diverged considerably from the regime of Pérez Jiménez in terms of its rhetoric and practice. At tense moments throughout his tenure in office, opponents argued Hugo Chávez was a dictator-in-the-making and that he would usurp the constitution to remain in office (or had already done so). Yet unlike his predecessor, Chávez respected the results of a plebiscite on his rule in 2009 and the proposals that would have allowed indefinite re-election were put on the backburner. In many ways, this burnished the democratic credentials of the government and its claim to constitutional legitimacy, but it also prevented a more radical enacting of its vision of social change. In this context, I argue hydroelectric infrastructure took on a critical role.

building.²¹ Aligning the work of ‘endogenous development with subaltern aspirations, the speech of the governor tied the dam to images of popular sovereignty and claims of universal citizenship to organized power.^{iv} The governor’s speech at the ceremony appealed to the completion of the dam as evidence of ruling party obedience to the popular will and inclusion of marginalized sectors of society in the community of the nation (Anderson 1991). In this case, the Venezuelan government was able to gain consent by way of appeals to the sovereignty putatively embodied in the projects, deflecting criticisms of its rule based on liberal criteria. Dams were ‘fetishes of progress’ that provided visible evidence of the type of development that could benefit groups likely to be threatened by restructuring of property relations and the mass of marginalized Venezuelans in rural areas. The infrastructure had a universalizing quality: society ostensibly bore the costs of such projects and reaped benefits. Yet such projects also affirmed the status of the technical-bureaucratic strata in the public sector. By displaying the fetish object in speeches and media presentations, leaders could hail subjects like Jorge who might otherwise support another political party. Converting image into reality and concrete into abstraction, television ads showing completed hydroelectric projects with turbines spinning and water falling, showcased the technical prowess of the Bolivarian government and its ability to overcome the sectional divides in society to impact daily life (for analysis of the role of the media in building popular support in Venezuela, see Schiller 2011 and Samet 2013). The mastery of the flow of water was evidence of the ability of the leadership to “sow the oil” into development and unify its disputatious groups.^v

Two years after the completion of the project little had changed for Jorge. He had assiduously cultivated a relationship with one of the enterprise managers in the belief that this relationship might bring him work as an assistant when the manager was transferred to another enterprise. Yet this came to naught. Without professional qualifications and the requisite connections, it was difficult for Jorge to obtain the kind of prestige he desired. Obtaining the credentials thus remained his long-term goal. Yet while Jorge’s own ability to advance was halted by bureaucratic inertia, favoritism, and his lack of a degree, the Bolivarian Government was able to highlight concrete achievements in the field of nation building, which accorded with his own status aspirations and values. Without his job in the enterprise, Jorge would likely have had a much lower standard of living and would not have been able to enjoy the prestige associated with a vanguard state project. Through his work on the farm, he was also able to earn a wage that would have been extremely

²¹ As the French theorist Althusser (1971) suggested, ‘interpellation’ is a process by which subjects are recruited from among concrete individuals and disparate wills are unified into a collectivity capable of reproducing or transforming contested social relations. I regard my analysis as compatible with this tradition and partially compatible with the analysis of Arenas and Gomez Calcaño 2006. Yet whereas the latter use the term ‘authoritarian’ to characterize the latest iteration of populism in Venezuela (a liberal epithet of dubious analytical value), I prefer to analyze the shifts in power in Venezuela in terms of its internal class structure and a populist politics that seeks to re-articulate the relationship of the nation with the global market (a move which has been violently opposed by rentier elites and which had not ruptured an organic totality or created social divisions, but rather hastened the dissolution of an exhausted hegemonic consensus while forging new alignments and coalitions).

difficult to secure elsewhere. He was also able to access social networks that allowed him to make use of his social capital and at least imagine that his relations with higher-ups might lead to a new position. Although dissatisfied, Jorge stayed within the wider field constituted by the *Chavista* movement and its high modern conception of development—a hegemonic consensus which portended the eventual uplift of the Venezuelan nation and citizens like him as its universal subjects.

Infrastructures of Modernity

If—as a number of scholars have argued (Howe et al 2015: 10)—infrastructure can be read as “a comment on modernity,” the revival of hydroelectric dams in Venezuela can be read as saying that development, however elusive, remains attractive for a range of actors, including those who are crucial to the preservation of organized power. Contrary to portrayals of the absolute class polarization of Venezuelan society in local and global media, the electoral successes of the Bolivarian Government have to a large extent depended on the support of the middle class and experts working in state enterprises (see Ellner 2009; Ellner and Hellinger 2003; Ellner 2013 for analysis of elections). In many ways, Jorge and his family represented this pivotal constituency and its relative ideological flexibility. As members of an intermediate caste of professionals who enjoyed a privileged position in society, these Venezuelans had witnessed the decline of the institutions to which they had devoted their working lives (as in the case of Jorge’s father) and were willing to back a leadership that seemed capable of restoring the *status quo ante*. Previously supporting the military dictatorship in the 1950s, this caste failed to reproduce itself at its prior status and it was this anxiety (and belief in the leading role of the military) that accounted for Jorge’s respect for Perez Jimenez and Hugo Chavez as well as his membership in a constituency somewhat strangely labeled ‘the socialist middle class.’

For Jorge and others like him, “socialism” represented “the chance to advance” and reproduce oneself at a respectable middle class status. The developmental policies of the Venezuelan government were a chance to make up for the lost years of Venezuela’s economic crisis and to return to a golden age (see O’Brien and Roseberry 1991). For these Venezuelans, “endogenous development” meant an increase in the total number of jobs and chances for stable employment. Yet even when these jobs were less than forthcoming, part of what kept this historic bloc together was the ability of leaders to point to completed infrastructure projects as evidence of their technical competence and obedience to the popular will. This high modernist vision based on improved energy networks and built environments affirmed the status of these actors as universal subjects of the nation and seemed to portend their eventual uplift. Such projects were visible signs of a state that would remake society in their image and perhaps more importantly, fail to challenge or threaten their status aspirations (as a more thorough application of the rhetoric of ‘class struggle’ might have). Instead, the Bolivarian Government pledged to revive the nation-building projects that had stalled in the wake of the crisis in the twentieth century and to restore the dignity of the nation (which Venezuelans like Jorge interpreted to mean restoration of their *personal* dignity).

For these Venezuelans, it was far less important for a government to be ‘democratic’ in a formalistic sense than for it to act accordance with the aspirations of the actors who staffed its institutions. From the standpoint of these Venezuelans, the ideological character of progress was not so important as absolute increases in standards of living and as I have suggested here, the construction of “signifying materialities” (Gupta 2015). The image of the years of successful nation building under Pérez Jimenez was thus a powerful symbol of a type of modernization that also indexed fatigue with a certain type of liberal regime—one which held regular elections, but failed to lift up the nation. From the perspective of *Chavistas* like Jorge, the governments of the Fourth Republic (1958-1998) had failed to deliver on their promises of transformation and these leaders were more interested in obtaining office and enriching themselves than advancing national interests. By contrast, the Bolivarian Government was allegedly separating “the true interests of the nation” from the narrow, parochial interests of certain cliques, which led him and other *Chavistas* to invoke the legacy of Perez Jimenez to describe this agenda.

Yet while the ideological re-construction of the Masparro Dam as “a socialist project” was a relatively simple matter, the Bolivarian Government ran into the very real problem of its materiality against the idealized type of progress it was supposed to bring about. Officials claimed the dam would generate 55,000 jobs in the local area and increase the overall productivity of the region. The dam would allow for the irrigation of agricultural lands and increase yields, spurring a multiplier effect. However, I found many of these claims difficult to believe, as the proposed irrigation channels required capital that the local farming groups lacked and that did not appear to be readily forthcoming from the government. As well, the jobs the dam was supposed to create would likely be temporary, and although the dam was generating electricity, the demand for power in the state had grown since its initial design, far outstripping its limited capacity. The dam could not cope with the increased demand and when a lack of rainfall brought drought conditions to the state in 2009-2010, the region experienced a wave of blackouts (see Fuentes 2010, Leon 2010, Batiz 2009). As I struggled to write notes in the dark for the duration of my fieldwork, it became clear to me and many Venezuelans that the arrival of the ideal society heralded by the revival of the project had been postponed yet again, and indeed it seemed to have receded even further into the future.^{vi}

Postscript:

When I returned to Venezuela in 2016, the atmosphere in the country had changed dramatically. The sense of hope, which had pervaded the early years of the petro-boom, had faded and it had been replaced by an abiding sense of fear and disillusionment. The optimism, which had been common among upwardly mobile *Chavistas*, had receded and nearly every aspect of daily life, from their consumption patterns to bodily comportment reflected the change in material circumstances. “*La gente anda desanimada*” or “the people go about their affairs dejectedly” was a phrase used to describe the depressive mood that had gripped society and conversations which had once been filled with talk of the price of sports shoes, cars, and consumer electronics were now filled with talk of the price of food. Although the term ‘shortage’ [*escasez*] was used to describe this insecurity, the term tended to obscure the logics of a crisis that was as much a product of a price

system distorted by speculation and the vicissitudes of the petroleum economy as a dearth of agricultural production. Sparked in the wake of the decline in oil prices, a lack of foreign currency to fund imports had helped to give rise to a class of black market traders known as *bachaqueros*—a term derived from the name of an insect notorious for destroying harvests. The activities of these traders were ubiquitous, but they had a differential impact across the social classes. In spite of import controls and balance of payment problems, one could still find expensive foreign food in posh restaurants in Caracas and elites still enjoyed many of their old habits. Yet for average *Chavistas*, life was radically different. Support for the ruling party among public sector workers, once considered bulwarks of ‘the revolution,’ was wavering, as their salaries and standards of living were destroyed by hyperinflation. Not surprisingly, these workers began to speculate about strategies for a potential exit from the crisis—an exit which some felt entailed leaving the ranks of *Chavismo*. Jorge was one of them.

When I arrived in Barinas, I was eager to get into contact with Jorge, as I had not spoken with him for several years, and I was curious to know what had become of him. Yet when I spoke with a friend and former coworker who had his contact number, he warned me that if I expected to have a conversation like years past, I would likely be disappointed. “*Jorge ya no es Chavista*”—“Jorge is no longer a *Chavista*,” the friend told me, and when the two of us met, his warning seemed prescient. At the start of our dialog, Jorge and I spent a great deal of time reminiscing about my days in the farm and talking about his life in recent years. A few years after I left the farm, Jorge had quit his job in hopes of finding a better position elsewhere. Yet after a period of working as a truck driver in another enterprise, he was laid off and was now unemployed. Jorge was gathering US dollars to travel to Ecuador to work abroad—a venture which he hoped I would be able to help him with. But the dialog became strained, however, when we turned to current events and it became clear I had not undergone the same political metamorphosis.

Although I had never been ‘a cheerleader’ for the Bolivarian Government, I was broadly sympathetic to its goals and I felt obliged to defend it from foreign intervention and a neoliberal opposition whose democratic credentials were tenuous at best. Yet when I spoke up in defense of the ruling party, noting that the current crisis would likely have befallen any government, regardless of its ideological stripe (such was the level of petroleum dependency), Jorge demurred. Disaffected from the ruling party, Jorge faulted Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro for the crisis and even his previous statements of admiration for the late President Hugo Chavez were now more circumspect. Faulting Chavez for indebting the country and enterprises like the one where we worked (which was now largely defunct), Jorge articulated a critique using the term *facilismo* or the belief that Venezuelans always pursued “the easiest path.” In contrast to his views of six years earlier, when he had impressed upon me that Venezuelans were “hardworking” [*El venezolano es muy trabajador*], he now suggested that “nobody in Venezuela wanted to work” and that social entitlements merely encouraged speculation. The only way to respond to the crisis, he believed, was to lift import controls and abolish state food security measures, a stance that implicitly reflected his continued preference for massive infrastructure projects and industrialization. Although I did not ask him if he voted for the opposition, it was clear from this discourse that he was no longer aligned with the ruling

party and that the development projects, which had once contained his anxieties were no longer sufficient. Socialism, he argued, was “utopian,” and he stated that Venezuela now “needed to try capitalism.” Difficulties with the electrical grid and hydroelectric dams, meanwhile, were rampant as power surges and rolling blackouts sparked fears that elements of the opposition were sabotaging the infrastructure to spread discontent. For their part, opposition leaders suggested such accusations were little more than an attempt to deflect attention from the government’s technical incompetence. Whatever the reality, the failure of these infrastructures and growing food insecurity were testing the hegemony of the ruling party and contributing to a sense that the Bolivarian Government was reaching the limits of its legitimacy.

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ⁱ Social benefit spending was drastically reduced in the years of the military dictatorship to finance the building of public infrastructure (Randall 1987). This reduction was motivated in part by ideology and the reality that Venezuela did not have enough capital to subsidize consumption *and* modernize at the same time. This tension between capital-intensive development and increasing standards of living has persisted throughout national history.

ⁱⁱ One of the first things Jorge told me about his family was that his father knew a great deal about Venezuelan history. Jorge's father was nearly 90 years old at the time of my fieldwork, and he witnessed the central events of the twentieth century. His father recalled nation-building projects put forward by multiple Venezuelan governments, and it was this vantage from which he judged the current leadership. Founded in the 1940s, his father worked for the airline Avensa, a venture partly supported by the Venezuelan government until it was nationalized outright in 1976. The airline enjoyed substantial success in its early years of operation, but later encountered difficulties with the economic crisis of the 1990s, eventually declaring bankruptcy in 1998. Today, the company is effectively out of business retaining a single plane from its original fleet. His father worked for Avensa most of his adult life and the success of the airline was one of the many indicators of the rising national status of Venezuela. The failure of Avensa framed Jorge's father's turn to support a figure on the opposite end of the ideological spectrum. The golden era of his life was the years of the dictatorship when Venezuela appeared to advance dramatically. These were years of tangible progress with the nation having a national airline and massive infrastructure projects. The folding of his long time employer certainly had an effect on his shifting sides. Chavez was elected at the time of the bankruptcy and the government stepped in and created another airline to replace it.

ⁱⁱⁱ I would argue this ascription is more accurate as a cultural image than a sociological category, however.

^{iv} I regard interpellation as a relationship between subjects and subjects, not subjects and objects. The products of labor cannot 'hail' nor can they 'release meaning' (cf. Larkin 2013: 335). In fact, I would argue that the confusion of the fetishistic power of objects with the subjective power of interpellation is part of the reification characteristic of capitalist society (see Lukács 1971). It was not the dam itself that called up the image of Perez Jimenez or hailed 'the people,' but Chávez and other leaders. The meaning was not contained purely in the dam. The infrastructure was situated within a discourse and the refurbishing of the project by another political leadership could have resulted in a different hegemonic re-construction.

^v For discussion of the role of water and hydraulic infrastructure in the construction of modernity, subjectivity and political consent (see Barnes 2013; Terhost et al 2013; Roberts 2008; Bakker 2007; Kaika 2005; Swyngedouw 2004, 1999; McMillan et al 2005; Eichelberger 2012).

^{vi} The power generated in the period fell well below the average national demand of 14,000 megawatts. For local media reporting, see Leon 2012 and Batiz 2009.